New Challenges to Neighborhoods

By Stanley B. Winters

IN many cities in the United States neighborhoods are facing a new challenge. Since World War Two, bulldozers and migrations have been upsetting traditional living patterns in urban centers. A mounting population has exerted steady pressure to the point of overcrowding existing housing and outleaping new facilities. Under heavy handicaps, neighborhood self-defence organizations have been valiantly striving to keep communities intact. Some groups have done more than others, but all have held out the hope that the pains of a "changing neighborhood" would be mild and peaceful. Today the effectiveness of such groups is being questioned. Some have succumbed to outside control, others to internal disunity. The neighborhoods are in danger of losing an important spokesman for their cause.

For over a decade an urban revolution has been working in the slum "core" areas of Pittsburgh, New Haven, Philadelphia, Newark, and other large northern cities. Vast sums have been invested in demolition and construction to improve the competitive position of downtown business and real estate. At the edge of the core, formerly ghettoes occupied by Jews, Negroes, and other minorities, new apartment housing is rising. Due to the high cost of urban land, much of this housing is publicly subsidized through acquisition of the slum properties by federal and local governments under a 2-1 cost ratio. Then they are resold to private developers at a price equal to the value of the site as vacant land, generally 10 to 30 per cent of the original cost. Sometimes state laws permit tax concessions to help the investors in the early stages. The whole idea is to keep down rents by keeping down costs. In practice, the apartments are set at high rentals, which combine with a genteel atmosphere to discourage the displaced slum dwellers from moving back. Instead they take the path of least resistance to whichever nearby "fringe" area will rent to minority groups.

Very soon an abnormal demand is built up for housing in the fringe. In Newark, for example, residents displaced from the central city in the past few years have moved mainly to the southern section. That section has undergone a 500 per cent rise in the Negro population since 1950 contrasted with a city-wide rise of 150 per cent.

UNHEALTHY ASPECTS CHANGE

The impact of this sudden demand upon the stability and morale of the "fringe" is enormous. Dwelling units are split up, attics and basements converted, often illegally. School enrollments mushroom, part-session classes are introduced. Fires increase. The influx brings bonanza rentals to fringe-area landlords, many of whom had begun in the business back in the slums. At first the results may be curious. On one south Newark apartment house the sign read "Colored Apt. to Let," while nearby another house featured "White Residency." But as whites move out, the racial balance continues to tip.

City administrations are unable or unwilling to prevent these unhealthy aspects of neighborhood change. Housing and sanitary code enforcement drops. Zoning restrictions often go by the board. Real estate speculators of every type are drawn to the blighted fringe. Faced with these trends, city planners may think of the area as the next likely site for light industry, a rerouted highway, or mass clearance. The focus of community life in the churches, temples, and businesses shifts from self-improvement to self-preservation. In self-defence, neighborhood councils are formed.

Neighborhood councils started up before V-E Day, but the real movement flowered afterward. Idealism and self-interest united individuals of diverse social, religious, and racial backgrounds in the common cause of self-defence. Once aims were clarified and a structure outlined, a concrete program would be launched. The minimal program, usually derived from groups like the American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods (ACTION), spurred clean-up, fix-up campaigns which stressed home improvements. The maximum program often stemmed from Saul D. Alinsky's book, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946). Alinsky wrote with missionary fervor about the successes of "people's organizations" in the mid-west in enlisting broad groupings in the struggle, not only to defeat blight, but also to gain for the community a share in the urban power structure.

NEIGHBORHOOD SELF-DEFENCE

Today these approaches to neighborhood self-defence are under challenge. On one side, continued pressure due to mass dislocation from the core area is altering the character of the fringes. On another, organizational weakness and paternalistic supervision prevent neighborhood sentiments from crystallizing into action. In most councils control of policy is focused at the top, where a power struggle often ensues. The struggle may reach the point where organizational unity is wrecked. An example is the Chelsea Community Council in New York, which had the benefit of Alinsky's counsel and $180,000 in foundation assistance. The group itself raised over $17,000 to conduct its activities. But the leaders of the more than eighty community organizations represented began to pull in different directions and two factions emerged. Commenting on the leadership structure, Everett C. Parker said:

It soon became apparent that Alinsky would not tolerate any agency set up on the basis of individual membership, block representation or some similar voluntary membership plan. Only an organization of organizations with a board of directors of delegated members, each organization having one vote on the board, was to be permitted.

In rebuttal, Alinsky charged an attempt at wilful obstruction aimed at negating or destroying the council. He wrote:

Discussion had given way to defamation. Logic and democratic debate were non-existent.

On February 17, 1960, the council was dissolved.

Chelsea reveals the hazards in leaving policy-making in the hands of professional and institutional leaders. A proper respect for grass roots opinions is the first condition for neighborhood self-defence. The vehicle should be an independent organization, captive of no one group or faction, responsive to the needs of the rank and file.

Independence is indispensable but rare. Some councils lose it under the protecting wing of City Hall, others are vigilantly supervised by social welfare agencies. Here and there exists a genuinely independent neighborhood council, organised, led, and controlled by the membership.

A vigorous neighborhood council movement would have a salutary impact upon municipal policies and politics. Relentless public pressure would increase the efficiency and integrity of city housing agencies, especially in the vital areas of health and building inspections. Alert citizen groups could safeguard against abuses in such urban renewal programs as New York's Title I. With expert help they would plan viable alternatives to mass clearance, expose tenant relocation patterns which perpetuate the ghetto, and publicize the connection between downtown redevelopment and fringe decay, between exclusive suburbs and segregated cities.

How realistic is such a perspective? What chances are there for an independent self-defence organization to survive? The situation in Newark merits attention.

NEWARK EXPERIENCE

Newark, the commercial and transportation hub of New Jersey, is a city of 438,776 persons of whom about 40 per cent are non-whites (16 per cent in 1950). A municipal reform movement in 1953 elected a new strong mayor—city council form of government. In the years following, private capital was encouraged to invest almost a billion dollars in downtown redevelopment. Today there are few sections of Newark's twenty-three square miles that have escaped the impact of the clearance and rebuilding begun in the 1950's. One result has been Newark's neighborhood council movement.

Newark's ten neighborhood councils, with one or two exceptions, have been active for five years. Their brief existence may actually have been an asset, for most of them were so small that no one tried to smother them with money or staff. With some help from welfare agencies and a glance from ACTION, they got by under voluntary leadership. Two or three conducted year-round programs. The council in the Clinton Hill section stands out. Its independence, broad membership, and achievements show neighborhood organization in a good light.

FRINGE AREA

Clinton Hill is a fringe area bordering on Newark's old Third Ward, formerly the Jewish and then the Negro ghetto, and now the locale for extensive mass clearance projects. The report of the Mayor's Commission on Group Relations for 1959 stated: "Though Negroes are moving out in all directions, the tendency is to move toward the south, to Clinton Hill, more than anywhere else." The area numbers 40,000 lower mid-

dle- and working-class residents on 100 city blocks. Many residents possess solid traditions of organizational work in church, fraternal, and civil rights groups; they form the backbone of the council.

The manner in which the Clinton Hill council got started influenced its structure and policy. In 1955 about two dozen residents and community leaders, concerned over panic selling, zoning violations, and declining city services, and eager to welcome new residents, began the group. After a series of house meetings, the council caught on at an open community conference called to draw up a program. Code enforcement, better schools, and improved city services were the key demands. Memberships at one dollar a year poured in.

Instead of imitating Alinsky's Back of the Yards Council in Chicago or other models, the council evolved its own setup. First it built mass membership among tenants and homeowners. Most members formed themselves into block-branches consisting of the residents in houses which faced each other on a street. Each block-branch handled immediate questions (nuisances, dwelling maintenance, social affairs) and elected leaders to represent it on higher council bodies. Then an advisory board was formed of top neighborhood leaders, including some of the founders, whose business or profession kept them from serving day-to-day. The board began to consider overall neighborhood issues (rent gouging, stimulating local small business, urban renewal, representation on city agencies).

Basic council policy is decided by a governing assembly to which both the block-branches and the member institutions send delegates. Because the block-branches predominate, policy tends to express the opinions of the membership at large. The council's daily tasks are coordinated by an executive committee of elected officers and committee chairmen responsible to the assembly.

CLINTON HILL EXPERIENCE

The premises implicit in the Clinton Hill experience were, first, that the residents themselves could judge competently where their interests lay, and, second, that unity would grow through united action around a democratically evolved program. The council eventually drew the conclusion that it could make known neighborhood aspirations for a better future on decision-making levels in the city's power structure. Needless to say, while these aspirations have been voiced many times, they have not produced the results optimistically expected. A non-partisan clause prevented the divisive effect which endorsement of any one candidate or political party might have had, but the usual types of political action have been employed.

The overriding fear in Clinton Hill is that the bulldozer will wipe out the carefully nurtured community spirit, that declining facilities will impel public-spirited residents to move out. Some leaders have moved, but new ones have stepped forward. The chief hope is that neighborhood solidarity will deter powerful interests from aiding or abetting Clinton Hill's decay and instead foster its rejuvenation.

Outsiders find it difficult to fathom the Clinton Hill "spirit." The council employs no paid staff, but its leaders devote many hours to its affairs. All meetings save large conferences are held in private homes and apartments. Religious institutions of all faiths make available office facilities and equipment. Sympathetic observers note that despite problems typical of a transitional area, something rare has been created. The council's work was "a decisive factor" in the selection of fourteen blocks in Clinton Hill as the locale for Newark's first neighborhood conservation project under Section 220 of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, as amended. The council chartered buses and toured Philadelphia one day looking for new ideas in housing and recreation. Its petitions saved for community use a large tract which a supermarket chain sought to purchase. City officials are well aware of the area's strong desire for improved services. Regular annual events include a cleanup drive, a birthday party-social, and an open community conference. Recently the council's program in schools and housing was published in "The Clinton Hill Neighborhood News" (circulation 10,000), which was paid for by small business advertising, written by a volunteer staff, and distributed free.

LOCAL GROUP ROLE

Clinton Hill's leaders hope that a strong, independent council movement in Newark will soon mature. Local groups can play a strong role in the city's unfolding neighborhood conservation program. The extent of this role hinges upon the city's application of the idea of "citizen participation." The plain fact is that many government agencies in renewal — and here Newark is not unique — see participation as the carrying out by the individual and the community of decisions made at the top.

"How can I help renewal?" one official was asked.

"Fix your fences and paint them," she answered.

"How can we build the 'New Newark'?" asked Clinton Hill ministers and merchants.

"Get the storekeepers to sweep their sidewalks," came the reply.

Such answers grossly underestimate the insight and energy latent in the city neighborhood. They see citizen participation in trivial actions rather than in the planning and decision-making. Yet a common element in many of the country's problems—racial, labor, political, social—is the need for broadening genuine participation in the making of vital decisions.

Unless the neighborhood's voice is heard and respected, how can people feel they have a real stake in urban renewal? The federal requirements which list "citizen participation" as one of seven elements in an acceptable workable program for renewal leave wide latitude in local hands. In Washington, D. C., residents had a direct voice in planning a neighborhood conservation project. But such democratic procedures are rare.

The issue is whether the mass of people in cities using urban renewal techniques can be enlisted to support decisions which will alter their future, yet in whose making they had no real voice.

The issue was beautifully put recently by Magdalena Miranda, a New York City social worker, at the annual Puerto Rican Youth Conference held at New York University. After raising the question of why New York's West Side is being redeveloped at the cost of dislocating many Puerto Ricans living there, she answered:

> Were all of these developments an accident, or were they the result of pressure from real estate power groups? I do not believe that it was accidental! If we Puerto Ricans are to be influence in areas of activities that concern and affect us, it would appear that we must begin to enter into the areas where the real power exists.

This is the nub of the issue of citizen participation. Hundreds of millions of dollars in public funds are being utilized to beautify and rebuild American cities. The sites selected, the monies expended, the plans dawn up—all are public matters of especial concern to city dwellers whose taxes directly finance redevelopment, but who bear a double burden through spreading fringe area blight, neighborhood decline, and forced migration from the condemned area. The structure of city government in many areas makes it difficult for a specific neighborhood to elect a specific spokesman on a legislative body. Most city councilmen represent broad, heterogeneous areas. And all too often, real power is concentrated in the executive and his appointed officials. In self-defence, the neighborhoods must speak out for themselves.

In cities where self-defense organizations are retreating or ineffective, they must seize the initiative. They must gather their strength in the neighborhood while it still is a unity. If the spontaneity, diversity, and independence of neighborhood councils were snuffed out, the results would be disheartening. Sterile paternalism would clog a potentially broad channel for genuine citizen involvement. The ability of the fringe areas to resist being burdened with much of the social and economic costs of urban redevelopment would be weakened. An imbalance in the urban decision-making process, already marked, would become irrevocable.

By bringing together whites and Negroes, workers, professionals, and small businessmen, tenants and homeowners, the neighborhood councils can become vehicles for peaceful and constructive social change in the large cities. Can they meet the new challenge? In the interests of a better city life for all, they must.

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